

The Board of Censorship

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While the inspectors and clergy have been talking about a censorship for the Broadway theaters, a very different censorship has been actually brought about for moving picture shows. It is not the kind of censorship usually thought of when that word is used. It is established at the request of the moving picture shows, will be financially supported by the shows themselves, and will have the force of law without being official. This censorship is in one way an experiment, but in another way conditions guarantee its success beforehand.

To describe this censorship in a few words: It is being at this moment established by a number of public bodies, who are acting on the request of the Association of Motion Picture Exhibitors of New York State. There will be a Governing Board, and an Executive Committee on Censorship, composed of five members. The following organizations will be officially represented on the Governing Board: The Public Education Association, The Federation of Churches, The League for Political Education, The Ethical-Social League, The Association of Neighborhood Workers, and The People's Institute. Possibly one or two other civic bodies will later be represented on the Governing Board.

The Executive Committee on Censorship will have five members, three from public bodies, two from the Association of Motion Picture Exhibitors. The two representatives of the Motion Picture Association will be chosen by the General Board on the nomination of the Motion Picture Association. The Board of Censorship will have offices, a secretary, and inspectors. The Executive Committee will meet daily, except in so far as it may see fit to delegate its duties to the secretary and the inspectors. Two questions must now be answered. First, what is the reason for the censorship and what good will it do? Second, how will it stand related to manufacturers, renters, and exhibitors, and how will it operate?

First, it is needless to point out that the moving picture business in New York has fallen upon evil days. Enough here to mention the war that is being waged on moving picture shows by the city authorities, the bitter hostility of certain vigilance of societies to the moving picture business, the antagonistic attitude of the inspectors, and the prejudice and

misunderstanding toward moving pictures which exists in the public mind. Unless the moving picture business is to be well-nigh driven out of existence in New York it must gain public standing and get organized in a way to demand a secure deal from the city. Some of the causes which led to the present state of affairs may be mentioned: The city's Licensing Bureau, which for many years was corrupt, lawbreaking, and positively encouraged the disregard of law, of public morals and public safety by the shows. The lack of organization among the shows, which made it impossible to discipline the few shows which were really bad, the shows running on month after month and bringing the whole business into disrepute. Conditions which made it impossible in the first place to choose freely between competing manufacturers, and which, on the other hand, have created a wide gulf between the exhibitor and the manufacturer, so that the public, through the exhibitor, had no way of registering its demand for good pictures. Couple this fact with the fact that it is cheaper and easier to produce a picture of crime or vulgarity than to produce a picture without artistic merits, and the reasons become clear for the poor quality of pictures which have been foisted on the exhibitors in recent times. The moving picture business, from manufacturer to exhibitor, has suffered by all these conditions, but it is the exhibitor who is being ruined by them, because it is he who loses his license, is dragged to court, and is tabooed by the good people of his neighborhood when he unwittingly displays an unworthy picture.

In other words, it is absolutely necessary to get better pictures and to get public standing. The only way to get better pictures is, first, for the exhibitors to organize and demand them, and, second, for the exhibitors and the manufacturers to have some common meeting ground, where they can reach an understanding as to what kind of pictures are desirable. The censorship here described represents the fact that the exhibitors have organized to get good pictures, that they invite the manufacturers to produce better pictures, and that they are going to make it known to the public that if moving picture shows can be bad they likewise can be, and often are, good. In such disrepute is the business in New York to-day that no move merely by the exhibitors themselves can convince the public of their good intentions. But the present censorship, which has behind it the most prominent civic and educational organizations of the city, which is supported and enforced by the exhibitors themselves, but controlled by organizations which represent public interest — this censorship will absolutely command public respect, and will obtain the cooperation of the city officials. The moving picture show which can point to the fact

that it is on the white list of the Censorship Board will be in a position to defend itself against attacks. And when the Censorship Board insists that if bad shows are put out of business good shows must just as consistently be protected, the Censorship Board will be obeyed. If the work is properly done it will be the saving of the moving picture business in New York.

How will the censorship operate? In the first place, the censorship will have nothing to do with any business struggle that is on in the moving picture trade. It will pass on any and all film that is submitted to it, and will condemn or approve with absolute impartiality. The show which uses censored film will be protected, and every renter and every manufacturer will be invited to submit his film and thereby become eligible to the patronage of the white list of shows. Every show in the Motion Picture Association will be bound to use only censored films, under penalty of expulsion from the association and the advertisement of that fact. The renter will naturally desire to be in a position to advertise that no film goes out of his office that has not been approved by the Censorship Board, and for this reason it will be natural to inspect the film before it leaves the hands of the renter. But it will be still more desirable to inspect the film before it leaves the hands of the manufacturer, and every manufacturer will be invited to submit his output, at no cost to himself, for censorship. If, then, a certain section of the film, is objectionable, it can be remedied by the manufacturer at minimum cost. And by being in touch with the manufacturers, the Censorship Board will be able to suggest the kind of picture that it has reason to believe the exhibitors and the public want.

One word must be added as to the rest of the program in moving picture shows — the illustrated songs and the vaudeville. All shows on the white list will be expected to use only such illustrated songs as have been approved of. Practically all the songs now sung and heard in the moving picture shows would be approved of by the Censorship Board. As for the vaudeville, the Censorship Board will not make any attempt to supervise this beforehand. But if anything outrageous is given by a show on the white list, that show will be cut off from the privileges of the censorship.

The first meeting of the Censorship Board has been called for Thursday, March 4 [1909], and operation will begin promptly thereafter. The whole matter is an attempt to check the indiscriminate attack of moving picture shows which is now going on; to make the shows worthy of public respect, and to win public standing for the business.

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